

2012-05

# Following a Fork in the Text: the Dagda as briugu in Cath Maige Tuired

Martin, Scott A.

<https://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/138967>

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

## Following a Fork in the Text: the Dagda as *briugu* in *Cath Maige Tuired*

Scott A. Martin, May 2012

The description of the Dagda in §93 of *Cath Maige Tuired* has become iconic: the giant, slovenly man in a too-short tunic and crude horsehide shoes, dragging a huge club behind him. Several aspects of this depiction are unique to this text, including the language used to describe the Dagda's odd weapon. The text presents it as a *gaból gicca rothach*, which Gray translates as a "wheeled fork." In every other mention of the Dagda's club – including the other references in *CMT* (§93 and §119) – the term used is *lorg*. *DIL* gives significantly different fields of reference for the two terms: 2 *lorg* denotes a staff, rod, club, handle of an implement, or "the membrum virile" (thus enabling the scatological pun *Slicht Loirge an Dagdai*, "Track of the Dagda's Club/Penis"), while *gabul* bears a variety of definitions generally attached to the concept of "forking." The attested compounds for *gabul* include *gabulgicce*, "a pronged pole," with references to both the *CMT* usage and staves held by Conaire's swineherds in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. *DIL* also mentions several occurrences of *gabullorc*, "a forked or pronged pole or staff," including an occurrence in *TBDD* (where an iron *gabullorg* is carried by the supernatural Fer Caille) and another in *Bretha im Fuillema Gell* ("Judgements on Pledge-Interests"). The context of this latter is a discussion of three types of persons who are not awarded interest should a weapon that they have given in pledge be damaged: these three are a *briugu*, a *filed*, and "a man whom his perpetual injunction has forbidden it" (*fer do-airgair a bith-erchuiiud*), because "their 'supporting staves' are more important than their weapons;" if a "walking-stick" (*gaballorg*) is pledged and damaged, in contrast, the pledger is awarded interest of three *séts* (Kelly 1988: 37; *Ancient Laws* V 420-421). It is the *briugu*, or hospitaller, in whom we are particularly interested here, as the extant literature on this figure suggests that the use of *gaból gicca* here to describe a staff held by the Dagda is in no way accidental.

The fact that the *gaballorg* is mentioned in a text on pledges is significant, as an object given in pledge "is an object intimately associated with the life of the pledger" (Kelly 1988: 164). This suggests that the description of an individual's staff as a *gabolgicca* could function as a signal that the person in question was a *briugu*. It is noteworthy for our consideration of the Dagda that another pledge-item strongly associated with the *briugu* was a cauldron (Kelly 1988: 37). "[T]he *briugu* valued his cauldron not only as a household item used in the preparation of food for a feast, but also as a symbol of his wealth and status" (O'Sullivan 2003: 125). A *briugu* was expected to maintain his cauldron in constant use to satisfy all comers (*ainsicc*, glossed as *bith fhluich* "always wet" or *bith lán* "always full"); inability or refusal to serve could cost him his status (O'Sullivan 2003: 121, 125). Compare this with the magical treasure assigned to the Dagda in *CMT*: "From Murias was brought the Dagda's cauldron. No company ever went away from it unsatisfied" (Gray 1982: 25).

This particular passage, and indeed all of §1-7 describing the Tuatha Dé's studies in four "northern" cities and the treasures they took away, has previously been identified as an interpolation from *Lebor Gabála* by a twelfth-century redactor of the original ninth-century text (Murphy 1954: 195 n. 1; Carey 1989: 53-54; see also Gray 1982: 11). Carey notes of this passage "the doctrines which they contain need not have been present in the original *CMT*; indeed the burden of proof is on anyone claiming that they were" (Carey 1989: 54). It is important to clarify to which doctrines Professor Carey is referring here. Certainly there is good reason to think that the idea that the Tuatha Dé came as invaders to Ireland is an innovation of the pseudo-historians (Scowcroft 1988: 37-38). It is an open question, however, whether the bare existence of the four talismans is an innovation as well. The *Lía Fáil*, at the least, is present in *Baile in Scáil*, which can be reasonably dated to the ninth century (Murray 2004: 4), and which appears to predate *LG* based on the latter's reference to the action of the former (Koch and Carey 2009: 253; see Murray 2004: 19 for references to other appearances in the early literature). To this we may also add comparative evidence: however they may have been understood during the medieval period, there is little doubt that Lug, Nuada, and the Dagda were originally pre-Christian deities, and the depiction of a hammer- or mallet-wielding Gallo-Roman god with a pot or other liquid vessel lends some weight to the argument that in the Dagda's case at least, the attribute and the god are persistently associated prior to the literary tradition (Heichelheim and Housman 1948). We have no reason, then, to think that a ninth-century recipient of the "original" text would *not* recognize the cauldron as intimately associated with the Dagda; this point will feature in the argument later.

Other aspects of the narrative action are in line with the identification of the Dagda as *briugu*. A primary responsibility of a *briugu* is to maintain a guest-house, and the Dagda is described as having a house (though not specifically a guest-house) at Glen Edin in §84, in a brief diversion that seems to serve no other function in the narrative, which may indicate that its inclusion was meant to serve solely as support for this identification. His involvement in negotiating a truce with the Fomoiré suggests the *briugu*'s role as "arbitrators and peacemakers of territorial disputes" (O'Sullivan 2003: 126). The tradition is not consistent in assigning this mediatory role to the Dagda: in the Early Modern Irish version of *CMT*, and again in *OCT*, it is Lug who encounters the Fomoiré and determines the date and location of the battle (Gray 1982: 97), suggesting that the specific placement of the Dagda in this role may be serving a symbolic function.

It is certainly no innovation to suggest that hospitality is integral to the Dagda's role in *CMT*. Gray's structuralist analysis of the tale in her series of articles published in *Eigse* demonstrates the importance of exchange, and the dangers of imbalances therein, in the *CMT* episodes featuring this figure. Her discussion of this motif draws largely on the evidence of the action in the text itself. I am suggesting, however, not simply that the Dagda *can* be viewed as a *briugu*,

but that the *CMT* author *specifically selected* language and narrative action to convey this identification to his readers via cultural knowledge from *outside* the tale – to be precise, via accepted symbols of a social role which are preserved in the law texts. Such an explicit identification of the Dagda as *briugu* has implications for our interpretation of several other features of the narrative.

In §75, for example, Lug convenes a conference of the Tuatha Dé consisting of himself, the Dagda, Ogma, Goibniu and Dian Cecht. In this grouping of five personages we may perceive two levels of the ideal tripartition of Irish society identified by Kim McCone (1990: 124-125, 163-164). The hospitaller/warrior/*aes dána* triad is represented by the Dagda, Ogma, and the three *fir dána* respectively; the latter divide trifunctionally again into leech/metalworker/poet (Dian Cecht/Goibniu/Lug). This gathering of five could therefore be taken to represent the entire *tuath* in microcosm. An alternate, or perhaps additional, explanation for this grouping would be that Lug has summoned the senior members of the two major kin-groups of the Tuatha Dé to speak for their kin at the battle-planning. (A Dagda/Ogma/Lug grouping appears elsewhere: in the battle preparations in §83, during the harp-raid episode in §163, as well as in *De Gabail in t-Sída* and *Tochmarc Étaíne*. This cluster, along with the Goibniu/Luchta/Credne cluster, may provide some evidence for a minimal functional “pantheon” of pre-Christian Irish deities, though obviously more study is required; the lists of the Tuatha Dé in the invasion narratives of the *Annals of Inisfallen* and *Lebor Bretnach* would also be relevant to this question.)

Despite his avowed and displayed prowess at fighting, wizardry, and harping, and his obviously high standing within the Tuatha Dé, the Dagda is mysteriously absent from the roll of artisans presented in Lug’s dialogue with the doorkeeper of Tara (§57-66). The *briugu* was clearly an important person in the king’s retinue: he was given a seat next to the king at the feast and entitled to one of the best cuts of the meat (Ó Daly 1962; Gwynn 1903, “Temair III” – Gwynn translates *brugaid* as “farmer”). He was potentially on the same level as the king and chief poet with regard to sick-maintenance, hospitality in another’s territory, and other privileges of rank (O’Sullivan 2003: 127-128). The *briugu* was not, however, necessarily a member of the *skilled* elite: “the office of *briugu* seems to have been one by which a wealthy man of non-noble birth could acquire high rank through displaying the hospitality and generosity so admired by the early Irish” (Kelly 1988: 36; see also Patterson 1994: 201-202; O’Sullivan 2003: 128-132). The Dagda, as a *briugu*, was thus an important member of the *tuath*, but not as such automatically eligible to be named among its artisans.

That the Dagda clearly *does* embody talents that should number him among the *aes dána* presents us with something of a conundrum. This is compounded by the observation that, among all of the Tuatha Dé, the Dagda appears best qualified to fill the function-bridging role of

the king described by McCone (1990: 125-128); indeed, in nearly all of his other appearances in the literature, he is explicitly named as king of the Tuatha Dé (or simply “of Ireland;” see the list in Martin 2012), and the pseudo-historical tradition represented by *Lebor Gabala* names him as following Lug in the kingship. This makes the grotesquerie and “bodily humor” of §93 all the more puzzling: why would a powerful figure like the Dagda be so explicitly degraded? Doris Edel acknowledges that “the preserved text is much too late to postulate a cultic or ritual origin for the scene” and suggests that the episode “may belong to a younger stratum of the text, its introduction triggered by the toponymic expression *Slicht Loirge an Dagdaí*” (Edel 2006: 100 and n. 111). I think that it is no coincidence that our strongest direct evidence for identifying the *CMT* Dagda as a *briugu* – the appearance of the *gaból gicca* – occurs in the same section: I propose that both the *briugu*-role of the Dagda and the scatological episode with Indech’s daughter were deliberately constructed by the ninth-century *CMT* author as part of the metanarrative of the tale.

There are two ways, I think, to view the dynamics of *CMT*’s portrayal of the Dagda. First, the scatological elements of the Dagda’s portrayal could be viewed as generalized commentary on the peasant farmer who attains social standing via his wealth by becoming a *briugu*, lampooning him as an uncouth, ill-favored weakling (despite his size, the Dagda is soundly beaten by Indech’s daughter, who is both a foreigner and a woman and thus doubly an inferior by the internal logic of the tale). The appearance of *Fer Benn* as the first name in the cryptic list of names given by the Dagda in this passage might be relevant to this analysis. I have argued elsewhere (Martin 2012) that *Fer Benn* should in this case be read metonymically as “man of cows;” this could signify “farmer” as negatively opposed to “artisan” in this context, especially given the insulting character of several of the accompanying names (Sayers 1988: 344-345) and the assertion elsewhere that among the Tuatha Dé “the farmers [*aes trebtha*] are non-gods” (Carey 1992: 28, 30, 37-39). (Cows are also reported in the legal literature as characteristic pledge-items for a *briugu*, though certainly not limited to them: Kelly 1988: 37, 165.) This interpretation would be in line with Gray’s structuralist reading of *CMT* as concerned primarily with correct social roles within and between social units such as the family or *tuath* (Gray 1982: 7). The Dagda as the idealized *briugu*/farmer, then, could be negatively contrasted with the magnificent appearance of Lug, the idealized artisan, when he arrives at Tara in §53, or even with Bres, whose name is glossed as “beautiful” in §21. This reading implies that the choice of the Dagda for this role is perhaps due simply to his pre-existing association with the club (easily shifted to the *gabullorg* of the *briugu*) and the cauldron, and that the narrative’s other markers of Dagda-as-*briugu* may have been inserted for internal consistency, as a set-up for §93; it could therefore be considered an identification of opportunity rather than an integral part of the subtext.

Alternately, the portrayal of the Dagda could function as a component of a wider political allegory for mid-ninth-century Ireland encoded in *CMT*. In his discussion of mythography in *Cath Maige Tuired*, John Carey argues that the union of Elatha and Eriu (specifically the depiction of such as the mating of a foreign king with the tutelary goddess of Ireland), the various narrative markers of the Fomori as Scandinavians, and the Bres-Nuada opposition seen in *CMT* are innovations of the author specifically chosen to reflect the ninth-century political climate of the text's composition (Carey 1989). Another text of the period, *Baile in Scáil*, deploys the figure of Lug (given an explicitly Milesian rather than Tuatha Dé lineage) to legitimate Conn Cetchathach's descendants (the Uí Néill) as high-kings of Ireland; Kevin Murray suggests that the construction of the king-list in that tale makes it likely that it was composed during the reign of Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruanaid, of the southern Uí Néill/Clann Cholmáin (Murray 2004: 4), and remarks that "[i]t seems clear, based on the assembled evidence, that *BS* was a propaganda document for the Uí Néill" (Murray 2004: 29). Nuada features as an ancestral figure in the earliest Leinster genealogical poems, and could therefore stand allegorically for that rival kingdom, acknowledging explicitly in the narrative the sovereignty of Lug/Clann Cholmáin over Ireland as the best defense against the Fomori/Viking threat. Similarly, the Dagda features prominently in the *dindshenchas* of Ailech, the headquarters of the northern Uí Néill /Cenél nEógain, and so could represent them; Aed Findliath of the Cenél nEógain was a strong military and political rival of Máel Sechnaill, and succeeded him in the high-kingship of Ireland.

The author of *CMT*, under this reading, would have portrayed the Dagda as a *briugu* in order to clear narrative space in the kingship for the Nuada-Lug succession that is integral to the text's propaganda function; this could account for the disparity between the frequent portrayal of the Dagda as king in other texts and his apparent exclusion from the elite ranks of the Tuatha Dé in *CMT*, as well as the absence of supporting evidence for either Lug or Nuada as king of the Tuatha Dé outside the *CMT/LG* narratives. *LG*'s portrayal of the succession of the Tuatha Dé kings as Nuada-Lug-Dagda could therefore represent an attempt to reconcile the *CMT* narrative with those contradictory traditions. The inferior status of the *briugu* compared to the other elites of the *tuath*, and specifically the grotesque picture of the Dagda presented in §93, would in this allegorical context also serve as a veiled insult directed at Aed Findliath, and the Cenél nEógain generally, instead of or possibly in addition to the more abstract social commentary noted above. Whereas the previous hypothesis suggests that the portrayal of the Dagda as a relative inferior to other Tuatha Dé characters was an opportunistic tangent, this hypothesis suggests that the status relationship is integral to the narrative.

Reading *CMT* as a narrative which (among other things) deliberately positions the Dagda outside of the kingship presents intriguing explanations for some otherwise unexplained features of the text. Consider *CMT* §24-25, in which the Dagda is forced to dig fortifications for

Bres: a king who performed manual labor suffered a reduction in his honor-price to the level of a commoner, which suggests that this might be a narrative ploy to disqualify the Dagda from the kingship (Kelly 1988: 19). Gregory Toner has advanced a similar argument to explain Macha Mongruad's enforced labor on the sons of Díthorbae, which also involved the construction of fortifications (Toner 2010: 100). Similarly, we might read the list of derisive names in §93 as another disqualification: the *Tripartite Life of Patrick* contains an episode in which the Uí Amolgnada refuse to select a king with a *forainm* (byname), and so one contender applies them to all of his brothers to reduce the competition (Charles-Edwards 2000: 25-26). I have been unable to determine whether this episode has a basis in the legal texts of the period, but certainly it is uncontroversial to suggest that the *Tripartite Life* would have been well-known to both the author of *CMT* and its audience.

This interpretation of the text also begs the question of whether other narrative relationships in *CMT* represent ninth-century Irish politics rather than pre-Christian mythology; addressing this question will require a more substantial synchronic examination of *CMT* and other "mythological cycle" texts than has been hitherto performed. One could begin by noting that the otherwise-unattested son of Bres and Bríg, Ruadan, bears the same name as the Leinster saint who cursed the king (and Clann Cholmáin ancestral figure) Diarmait mac Cerbaill (*Aided Diarmada meic Fergusa cerrbeoil*; O'Grady 1892: I, 72-82; II, 76-88), and further that none of the other literary evidence for a Bres-Bríg pairing can be confidently assigned to a date before the mid-ninth century (Carey 1989), and may therefore have been influenced by *CMT* rather than reflecting a pre-existing tradition. One might consequently ask whether the portrayal of Bríg in *CMT* as wife of one traitor and mother of another is allegorically targeted at Leinster, where the cult of her namesake St. Brigid was centered at Kildare. (According to the *Fragmentary Annals* §292, dated 862, the Norse or Norse-Gael leader Amlaíb Conung was married to Aed Findliath's daughter; this may have been a factor in the narrative relationships around Bríg as well.)

An extreme version of this reading would suggest that there is in fact very little narrative content in *CMT* which we may confidently regard as reflective of pre-Christian Irish mythology. This is not, however, a new idea; Mark Scowcroft wrote in 1988:

Reading *CMT*, one must indeed suspect not so much the historicization of the event (a mythological commonplace) or the anthropomorphism of its participants (the Indo-European norm) but the portrayal of the theomachy as a war between medieval *tuatha*. Only extreme assumptions about the "archaism" of Irish tradition could justify the belief that a text so clearly addressed to a medieval audience should also represent Irish paganism. The pre-Christian content of the Mythological Cycle can only be established, strictly speaking, by comparison with the testimony of archaeology, classical

ethnography, or other Indo-European mythologies. The mythographers of Christian Ireland were too interested in the old gods to leave them alone.

## **Bibliography**

*Ancient Laws of Ireland* (1865). 5 v. Dublin: H.M. Stationary Office.

Carey, John (1989-90). Myth and mythography in *Cath Maige Tuired*. *Studia Celtica* 24-25: 53-69.

Carey, John (1992). A *Tuath Dé* miscellany. *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 39: 24-45.

Charles-Edwards, T.M. (2000). *Early Christian Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Edel, Doris (2006). "Bodily matters" in early Irish narrative literature. *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 55: 69-107.

Gwynn, Edward (1903). *The Metrical Dindshenchas, Part I*. Todd Lecture Series, vol. VIII. Dublin: Academy House.

Gray, Elizabeth A., ed. (1982). *Cath Maige Tuired*. Naas: Irish Texts Society.

Heichelheim, F.M and J.E. Housman (1948). Sucellus and Nantosuelta in mediaeval Celtic mythology. *Miscellanea philologica, historica et archaeologica in honorem Huberti van de Weerd (L'Antiquité Classique 17)*: 305-316.

Kelly, Fergus (1988). *A guide to early Irish law*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

Koch, John T. and John Carey, eds. (2009). *The Celtic heroic age*. Oakville, CT: Celtic Studies Publications.

Martin, Scott A. (2012). The names and epithets of the Dagda.

<https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/138966>

McCone, Kim (1990). *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature*. Maynooth: An Sagart.

Murphy, Gerard (1954). Notes on *Cath Maige Tuired*. *Éigse* 7: 191-198.

Murray, Kevin (2004). *Baile in Scáil*. Dublin: Irish Texts Society.

Ó Daly, Máirín (1962). *Lánellach Tigi Rích 7 Ruirech*. *Ériu* 19: 81-86.



O'Grady, Standish (1892). *Silva Gadelica*. 2 vols. London: Williams and Norgate.

O'Sullivan, Catherine (2003). *Hospitality in medieval Ireland, 900-1500*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.

Patterson, Nerys (1994). *Cattle-lords and clansmen: the social structure of early Ireland*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Sayers, William (1988). *Cerrce*, an archaic epithet of the Dagda, Cernunnos and Conall Cernach. *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 16(3-4): 341-364.

Scowcroft, R. Mark (1988). *Leabhar Gabhála*, part II: the growth of the tradition. *Ériu* 39: 1-66.

Toner, Gregory (2010). Macha and the invention of myth. *Ériu* 60: 81-109.